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Biblical Principles for Political Engagement: Worldview, Issues, and Voting

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BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW SERIES




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by David Closson

FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL
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Do Christians have a moral or biblical obligation to participate in politics? Is there a distinctively Christian way to engage the political process? Do Christians have a duty to vote, and if so, what principles should inform believers when they cast their ballot?

Christians in every generation have debated these questions. In fact, over the years several models and suggestions for Christian political and cultural engagement have been proposed.¹ These proposals, while differing in a few particulars, share the common goal of helping Christians apply biblical principles to moral and political concerns.

That Christians are engaging with today's pressing moral concerns is encouraging because there have been times when that has not been the case.² As recently as 1947, theologian Carl Henry warned his post-war contemporaries that historic Christianity risked losing influence because of its hesitancy to apply the gospel to "pressing world problems."³ In Henry's day, many evangelicals were tempted to or had already withdrawn from the public square. As a result, evangelicals were becoming increasingly inarticulate about the social reference of the gospel. Henry rightly feared that this withdrawal signaled to the world that Christianity could not compete with other ideologies. Instead of withdrawing, Henry encouraged Christians to apply the fundamentals of their faith to the full range of issues the gospel speaks to, including politics, the foundational arena where people's public lives are ordered.

Thankfully, many Christians in the mid twentieth century followed Henry's lead and pursued a path of active engagement with the world. However, over the last few decades, with the rise of secularism and the Sexual Revolution's repudiation of Christian sexual ethics, biblical principles have been steadily pushed to the periphery of the public square. As a result, it is not uncommon for Christians today to be uninformed or confused about how their faith ought to influence their public engagement.

Recently, most notably in response to the 2016 presidential election, the connection between gospel faithfulness and political responsibility has re-emerged and Christians are again asking how to relate biblical convictions to the issues of the day.

In today's hyper-politicized environment, some argue that Christians should not associate too closely with elected officials or political parties, because it conflates the responsibility of the church with that of the state.⁴ Some take this view and argue for full withdrawal from the public and political space. On the other end of the spectrum are those who argue for heavy involvement with politicians and partisan politics.

HOW SHALL WE MAKE SENSE OF ALL OF THIS?

We will attempt to tackle these questions and concerns in this publication, as we seek to help Christians navigate the issue of political engagement from a biblical worldview by connecting the implications of the gospel to the political process with these two questions:

- First, we will address the question of *whether Christians should engage* the political process (including asking what "politics" is and why we should care) and see if the biblical worldview offers a framework or set of principles that can help Christians navigate the field of politics.

- Having answered that, we will consider the role of government, discuss *how Christians should engage* in politics (including voting, our two-party system, clear biblical issues, and some practical tips), and think through a few current issues.

SHOULD CHRISTIANS ENGAGE IN POLITICS?

Without doubt, we live in a time of acute political polarization. These divisions are inevitably exacerbated during campaign season with the barrage of candidate advertisements, robo-calls, 24-hour cable TV coverage, and campaign literature.



Moreover, the toxic tone and extreme partisanship in politics can be discouraging. Thus, it is no surprise that withdrawing from the political process has become a temptation for many Christians. After all, if God is sovereign and controls the heart of the king (Prov. 21:1), do we really need to get involved in the messy world of politics? Because political engagement can be divisive, shouldn't Christians abandon politics and direct their energies toward more spiritual pursuits?

WHAT IS "POLITICS?"

At this juncture, it is critical to step back and clarify what we actually mean when we use terms like "politics" or "political." Definitions are important and can go a long way in clearing up confusion. For many, the term "politics" likely invokes notions of candidates clashing on TV, abrasive sound-bites, or a nasty campaign ad denouncing someone's political opponent. Here "politics" is reduced to campaigning and becomes synonymous with elections and politicking. However, narrowly construing politics to refer to politicians, campaigns, or an apparatus of the state is a truncated view of the nature of politics.

POLITICS, PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD, IS ABOUT HOW GROUPS OF HUMANS ORGANIZE THEIR AFFAIRS.

Etymologically, the word “politics” comes from the Greek word “polis” which referred to Greek city-states (political entities ruled by a body of citizens). Significantly, for the ancient Greeks, politics was “concerned with the struggle over the control and distribution of power across a range of sites,”⁵ and was not limited to the domain of the state. Thus, politics, properly understood, is about how groups of humans organize their affairs—whether a home-school co-op’s decision of where to host meetings, a group of neighbors deciding that trash needs to be picked up off their street, or an agreement between neighbors to watch each other’s house while on vacation. In this sense, politics is intimately connected to community—how we relate to other people—and inextricable from the concept of loving one’s neighbor. If we become wrongly convinced politics only deals with a narrow subset of clashing politicians, and thus withdraw from politics at large, society—and our neighbors—will be worse off.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT POLITICS?

A question for many Christians seeking to live out their faith is why they should care about politics in the first place. Although not explicitly stated, in some circles there seems to be an assumption that politics is inherently defiled and that political activism is inappropriate for those serious about the gospel. This view fits into what theologian Wayne Grudem calls the “Do Evangelism, Not Politics” approach to civic engagement.⁶ Those who hold this view suggest that because Jesus’ final command was to make disciples (Mat. 28:16-20), Christians should exclusively focus on sharing the good news and discipling others in the faith. In other words, they argue that because political engagement does not lead someone to faith in Christ, it should not be a top priority.

However, upon closer examination of Scripture, this objection fails to account for a broader perspective of politics that incorporates how people order their lives and affairs and the reality that the Christian worldview has much to say about civic

THE BIBLE TEACHES THAT GOVERNING AUTHORITIES HAVE BEEN INSTITUTED BY GOD (ROM. 13:1-7).

responsibility. In fact, the Bible teaches that governing authorities have been instituted by God (Rom. 13:1-7). Moreover, Paul says that government is “God’s servant,” and carries out the God-ordained task of administering justice. Although God is sovereign, he often chooses to use human means to bring about his will and implement his plan. In fact, as early as Genesis 9, God provides a general authorization for action against murderers (Ge. 9:5-6).⁷ The seemingly clear implication of this passage is that communities must form or support a government to employ this God-given justice mechanism. Thus, the role and purpose of the state as well as the Bible’s consistent concern for meeting both spiritual and temporal needs point to the conclusion that Christians must, as they have opportunity, seek to engage the political process in a God-honoring way.

Moreover, the Bible contains numerous examples of God’s people engaging in politics as part of a holistic approach to ministry that meets practical needs.

In the Old Testament, the Bible speaks about government and provides examples of faithful engagement. For example, Joseph and Daniel served in foreign administrations and used their influence to implement policies that benefited society.

The prophet Jeremiah instructed the exiles in Babylon to seek the welfare of their new city. The people were also commanded to pray for the city, “for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). A thriving society would benefit God’s people as well as the city’s inhabitants.

In the New Testament, Jesus engaged in holistic ministry, caring for the physical and spiritual needs of people; feeding the hungry and caring for the sick were extensions of the message he preached. Paul also advocated a comprehensive approach to ministry: “As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone” (Gal. 6:10). Also: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

THE BIBLICAL ADMONITION TO ENGAGE IN “GOOD WORKS” HAS PUBLIC SIGNIFICANCE AND IS THEREFORE INESCAPABLY POLITICAL.

In short, the admonition to engage in “good works” has public significance and is therefore inescapably political. Decisions made by those in government have a substantial impact on people’s lives. Consequently, a Christian worldview recognizes that every area of life must be included in the “good works” of believers, especially politics, an area with massive implications for Christian evangelism, missions, and the freedom to preach the gospel.

Facing charges of sedition, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:10). Evidently, the apostle was comfortable working within the political and legal system of his day to pursue justice against false accusations.

Finally, Paul instructs Timothy: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Christians are to pray for their leaders whose decisions can advance or inhibit their ability to lead godly and dignified lives.

The Bible is clear, in both Old and New Testaments: as the realm where we order our shared lives, politics occupies a significant place in society and is a central area of Christian concern. Moreover, politics is unavoidable. Because government and its laws are an inextricable part of our lives, there is no way to avoid some level of involvement. This is true for Christians, who although “sojourners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11) in this world, are nevertheless citizens of the “City of Man” as well as the “City of God.” Christians ought to endeavor to be good citizens of both cities and leverage their influence for the advancement of laws, policies, and practices that contribute to the flourishing of our neighbors.

Thus, Christians have a biblical *obligation to engage* politics and the political process. The question now is: What is the *right way to engage*?

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS ENGAGE IN POLITICS?

In recent years this question of how Bible-believing, gospel-loving Christians should exercise their political responsibilities has been raised by some prominent evangelical leaders. These leaders have expressed concern with the current divisive and coarse nature of American politics and have offered suggestions for engaging in the political process.

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Much of their advice is helpful. For example, one pastor argued that “to not be political is to be political.”⁸ By this he rebukes those who avoid political conversations for fear of being perceived as “too political.” However, as he rightly notes, avoiding politics altogether is a tacit endorsement of the status quo which might include social conditions that perpetuate flagrant injustice. Historical examples include nineteenth-century churches that refused to denounce slavery and mid-twentieth-century churches that remained silent on Jim Crow laws. By refraining from becoming “too political,” these churches, by de facto, supported evil institutions and laws.

A second example is the Church of England in South Africa (CESA) and their approach to apartheid (1948-1994). Although the Church sought to take an “apolitical” stance, this pretense of neutrality allowed the CESA to be misled into accepting a social, economic, and political system that was cruel and oppressive.⁹ By trying to not be political, the church effectively baptized the status quo and countenanced a system that tolerated profound injustice. The German church’s capitulation to the Nazis in the 1930s represents a similar failure. By not denouncing Hitler’s explicitly anti-Christian ideology, pastors failed to shepherd their churches during a time when faithful Christian discipleship was needed.

Recently, a prominent Christian leader encouraged pastors to engage in the political process by praying for leaders and preaching on controversial issues as they arise in the course of preaching through the Bible.¹⁰ According to this approach, the overarching goal of cultural engagement is being a faithful presence in the community and electoral politics is just one of many ways to live out the Bible’s command to love thy neighbor.

However, despite helpfully framing some questions related to Christian civic responsibility, the utility and real-world application of this advice is limited because it stops short of prescribing concrete action steps for believers to take. In other

words, these recommendations do not go far enough because they do not grapple with specific issues and the reality of our two-party system.¹¹ Although the church's mission must never be equated with the platform of a political party, should we do more than call for cordial discourse and preach on a few moral issues? Is there an ethical imperative for Christians to vote, and if so, what issues or principles should guide us when we vote?

SHOULD CHRISTIANS VOTE?

Answering the question about whether Christians should vote requires an understanding of America's unique form of government, government's God-ordained authority in general, and a theologically informed view of voting.

During a recent election, one Christian leader expressed discomfort with hosting voter registration drives or providing voter guides to his congregation because he believed it communicated that direct participation in the political process is "what Christians should do."¹² Although he believes that "voting is a good thing," he did not think it was prudent for the church to go beyond praying for candidates and preaching on moral issues. However, despite the pastor's intention to preserve the mission of his church, does this approach fall short of what full-orbed Christian discipleship requires?

**CHRISTIANS ARE STEWARDS OF THE BALLOT BOX,
JUST LIKE WE ARE STEWARDS OF EVERYTHING
ELSE GOD HAS GIVEN US.**

In representative democracies like the United States, the locus of power is the citizenry; the government derives its authority from the people. As Alexander Hamilton explained in Federalist Paper 22, the consent of the people is the "pure original fountain



of all legitimate authority.”¹³ In the United States, this principle is foundational, and provides citizens with incredible opportunity and responsibility. Unlike billions of people around the world, Americans, through the ballot box, control their political future. Indeed, we are stewards of it, just like we are stewards of everything else God has given us.

For Christian citizens, the implications of America’s form of government are even more significant when considered alongside Paul’s teaching in Romans 13 where the apostle discusses the purpose of government. According to Paul, government is ordained by God to promote good and restrain evil. To this effect, God authorizes the government to wield the sword for the administration of justice. As one theologian recently explained, “The sword is God’s authorized gift to humanity for protecting life.”¹⁴

From these considerations, a truth with far-reaching implications emerges for Christian political engagement: Voting is an exercise in delegating God-ordained authority. Because power resides with the people in a representative democracy, when Christians vote, they are delegating their ruling authority to others. In other words, by voting, Christians are entrusting their “sword bearing” responsibility to officials who will govern on their behalf. Seen from this perspective, voting is a matter of stewardship; failure to vote is a failure to exercise God-given authority.

Thus, it is simply not enough for pastors to hope their congregations are informed about candidates and issues. If the act of voting is the act of delegating the exercise of the sword, pastors *should* communicate to their members: “This is what Christians should do.” Given the unavoidable role of politics and

the direct, real-world impact that the state's decisions have on people's lives, downplaying the responsibility to vote amounts to a failure in Christian discipleship and neglects to offer comprehensive love of neighbor.



On the issue of showing love to our neighbor, some argue that “Political engagement is only one way of loving our neighbor and trying to be a faithful presence in the culture.”¹⁵ Although true, this argument minimizes the significance of government and the role it plays in people's lives. Obviously, love of neighbor must be embodied in all aspects of life. However, can Christians really care for their neighbors if they don't engage in politics, the arena where a society's basic rights and freedoms are shaped? Further, given the United States' outsized influence in the world, how can American Christians love the people of the nations without having a vested interest in how their own government approaches the issue of religious liberty and human rights worldwide—issues which go to the heart of the *imago dei*? Through their vote, Americans determine who will represent their country abroad as well as the values that will be exported around the world. Will America's ambassadors be stalwart defenders of those engaged in religious expression (such as missionaries) and vigorously advocate for their rights? Will abortion, under the euphemism of “family planning,” be funded overseas by American taxpayers or will U.S. foreign policy value the life of the unborn? Again, American believers, through exercising their right to vote, have a direct say in these issues.

PASTORS SHOULD HELP EDUCATE AND EQUIP THEIR MEMBERS TO THINK BIBLICALLY ABOUT POLITICAL ISSUES, CANDIDATES, AND PARTY PLATFORMS.

Because of these considerations, pastors should exhort their members to be involved in the political process and to vote. Moreover, they should help educate and equip their members to think biblically about political issues, candidates, and party platforms. Much of this equipping and educating should be affected through the regular rhythms and liturgies of the church (preaching the Word, corporate prayer, hymnody, etc.). However, for the sake of robust political discipleship, additional steps should be taken. In many congregations this might mean making voter guides and other educational material available.

Even now, many may get squeamish at this suggestion; if so, we must recall a proper understanding of “politics” as discussed previously—that of deciding how best to organize the affairs of the community and love one another. When we realize politics is, at its core, about how we love our neighbor as we live and order our lives together, we understand there is no reason to shy away from becoming informed about how to vote. Rather, we must embrace the question. In so doing, we must make room for discussion and disagreement on certain issues within the body of Christ, but we must not avoid talking about them altogether. It is not enough to espouse concern for human dignity but not support policies and candidates who will fight to overturn profound moral wrongs. In a Genesis 3 world plagued by sin, Christians are called to reverse the corroding effects of the fall wherever they exist. Our decision to cast an informed vote is an attempt to do just that.

REALITY OF OUR TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

As we faithfully seek how best to engage in politics, we also have to grapple with the reality of voting in the current context of our two-party system.

Some have argued that Christians must participate in the political process without identifying the church with either party. The concern is that political parties typically insist their members embrace every position in the party platform and that this could lead to an acceptance of unbiblical policies and an inability to speak prophetically. Instead, the argument goes, Christians should seek to address pressing moral concerns regardless of what party platforms dictate. In other words, Christians should try persuading party leaders and policy makers of the merits of their ideas, rather than accepting an entire platform that may contain aspects that are morally problematic.

Many evangelical organizations and leaders have adopted this approach, and rightfully so, because Christians should never conflate the message of the church with that of a political party. We must evaluate political positions in light of the Bible, not the other way around.



However, while the church should never be tied to a specific political party or movement, this fact should *not be used as an excuse* to not speak truthfully about where the two major parties stand on the most fundamental moral issues. Because withdrawal from the political process and full assimilation into a party are equally unacceptable positions, Christians must adopt an issue-based approach that is clear and honest about where the major parties and candidates stand.

Historically, the last President to not be affiliated with either the Democratic or Republican parties was Millard Fillmore, a member

of the Whig party who served as the 13th President of the United States (1850-1853).¹⁶ Therefore, for good or ill, America has a two-party system and Christians must acknowledge and operate within this system. While the goal of Christians engaging in political activism should be to persuade members of both parties to approach issues from a biblical worldview, decisions must be made at election time on who to support. Thus, what are the issues Christians should consider when deciding who to vote for? How should we decide who to support?

WHAT ISSUES ARE MOST CLEAR FROM SCRIPTURE?

Recently, certain evangelical leaders have argued that the historic Christian positions on issues like abortion, marriage/sexuality, race, and poverty do not fit into contemporary political alignments. They've suggested that while Republicans hold a more biblical view on abortion and marriage/sexuality, Democrats are more faithful to Scripture in their approach to racial justice and caring for the poor.

America's two main political parties are increasingly divided on a number of issues—abortion, marriage/sexuality, and religious liberty being significant recent examples. Although more of a consensus formerly existed between the parties on how to deal with these issues, American culture has become more divided. Consequently, our political parties have taken increasingly divergent positions on them.

Thus, Christians convinced of their responsibility to vote and engage politically need to be aware and conversant regarding the issues at stake and know where the political parties stand. But more importantly, Christians must be grounded in what God's Word teaches.

Therefore, what follows is a survey of what the Bible teaches on a few pertinent moral issues that are currently being debated at the highest levels of government. These issues include abortion, marriage, race, and poverty alleviation. Moreover, a clear-eyed, honest analysis of where the major political parties stand on these issues will be provided.

Abortion and Marriage/Sexuality

On abortion and the status of the unborn, the Bible is straightforward—life begins at conception and abortion is murder (Ps. 139:13-16, 22:10, Jer. 1:5, Gal. 1:15, Ex. 21:22). Likewise, on marriage; the Bible is clear and presents marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman (Gen. 2:24, Mat. 19:5, Mark 10:6-9, Eph. 5:22-23). Scripture is also unambiguous regarding the moral status of homosexual conduct (1 Cor. 6:9-11, Rom. 1:26-28, 1 Tim. 1:10-11, Lev. 18:22, 20:13, Gen. 19:1-5). On these issues the Bible is unmistakable; there is a clear “Thus saith the Lord.”

WHEN IT COMES TO THE ISSUES OF ABORTION AND MARRIAGE/SEXUALITY TODAY, THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE TWO PARTIES COULD NOT BE STARKER.

When it comes to the issues of abortion and marriage/sexuality today, the national party positions of the Republicans and Democrats fundamentally disagree. The Republican Party platform states that “Traditional marriage and family, based on marriage between one man and one woman, is the foundation for a free society and has for millennia been entrusted with rearing children and instilling cultural values.”¹⁷ The Democratic Party platform states that Democrats “applaud... [the] decision by the Supreme Court that recognized that LGBT people—like other Americans—have the right to marry the person they love.”¹⁸

On abortion, Democrats have moved away from the view that abortion should be “safe, legal, and rare”¹⁹ to seeing abortion as a fundamental right that should be funded by the government. Whereas the 1992 Democrat platform included the language: “The goal of our nation must be to make abortion less necessary,”²⁰ the 2016 platform stated: “We will continue to oppose—and seek to overturn—federal and state laws and policies that impede a woman’s access to abortion, including by repealing the Hyde Amendment.”²¹ The Hyde Amendment, first passed in 1976, prohibits the use of federal funds to pay for abortion. The 2016 Democrat platform included the first explicit appeal from a major political party to repeal this provision.

The issue of infanticide has also become part of the recent political conversation. Infanticide, the killing of infants born alive, first entered the political discussion in 2019 when New York repealed a section of the state’s public health law which had previously specified that a child born alive during a failed abortion was protected under state law. The updated law also allows for



abortion even after 24 weeks of pregnancy if the mother's health is in jeopardy. However, the "exception to health" provision is not restricted to a physical definition and can include psychological and emotional health (subject to the medical judgment of the abortion provider). Thus, the new law is so broad that abortion is now legal until the moment of birth in New York.²²

Democrats have been outspoken on this issue. Following the passage of New York's abortion law, Delegate Kathy Tran (D) introduced a similar bill in Virginia to legalize abortion through the third trimester. When asked if her bill would allow for an abortion even after a woman showed "physical signs she is about to give birth," Tran responded, "My bill would allow that, yes."²³ Responding to these comments and the public outrage that ensued, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam (D) was asked what would happen to a baby who survived a late-term abortion under the proposed legislation. His response was shocking: "The infant would be delivered. The infant would be kept comfortable. The infant would be resuscitated, if that's what the mother and family desired. And then a discussion would ensue between the physicians and the mother."²⁴

Republicans likewise have addressed the emerging issue of infanticide. In response to the developments in New York, Virginia, and other states, Senator Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) introduced the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act in January 2019.²⁵ The proposed legislation would require doctors present during a botched abortion—an abortion that results in the birth of a living infant—to provide the same level of care that would be offered to any other baby at the same stage of development. Doctors who did not provide proper care would be subject to criminal prosecution. Unfortunately, Senate Democrats showed no willingness to support the bill, and acted to delay its consideration.²⁶ On February 25, 2019, Democrats denied cloture on the motion to proceed. Three Senate Democrats voted to advance the bill to a final vote.²⁷ Democrats in the House refused to consider the bill.

Overall, in terms of biblical clarity and priority, Christians have rightly seen abortion and marriage/sexuality as primary moral concerns. Regarding marriage/sexuality, the Republican party advocates for understanding marriage as the union between a man and a woman. Republicans are willing to say that children deserve both a mom and a dad.²⁸ Republicans are also willing to argue that biological sex is not fluid and that adopting the aggressive social agenda of LGBT activists puts women and girls in danger. Regarding abortion, innocent life is being taken, and this is an act the Bible clearly condemns. The gravity of this issue alone should inform how believers approach how we as a society are collectively making decisions – i.e., engaging in politics.

But let's not end here. What about some of the other moral issues currently being debated? What does the Bible teach on these issues, and where do the major parties stand on them?

Poverty and Race

Two other issues with great moral significance are race and poverty. Scripture reveals that God cares about both, which means Christians must seek to apply biblical wisdom in appraising how the political parties address them.

God's concern for the poor is a pervasive theme throughout the Bible. Exhortations to care for the poor abound (Prov. 3:27-28, 22:22-23, 31:8-9, Isa. 1:17, 10:1-3, Zech. 7:8-10) and Jesus himself displayed remarkable concern and compassion for the poor in his healing and teaching ministry (Mat. 11:4-6, 25:45, Luke 6:20-21, 14:14). Jesus' half-brother, James, wrote that "pure and undefiled religion" includes care for orphans and widows (James 1:27). Simply put, a Christian cannot open their Bible and ignore God's call to care for the poor.

Concerning racial equality, the Bible is clear that all people are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Additionally, the good



news of the gospel is for everyone; Christ died for everyone, and in him believers from every tongue, nation, and tribe are reconciled to God and each other in “one new man” (Eph. 2:14-16). In terms of access to God, the Bible is unmistakable: distinctions based on race are abolished in the new covenant (Gal. 3:28-29, Col. 3:11). In heaven, people from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” will praise God (Rev. 7:9). Consequently, re-erecting these distinctions in how we treat people, and acting adversely to people based on skin color (or background or ethnicity) is sinful and must be strongly repudiated by the church.

Clearly, the Bible speaks to poverty and race. Committed Christians are obligated to care about these issues; faithfulness to God’s Word requires nothing less. Unlike the issues of abortion and marriage/sexuality, however, the positions of the two main political parties don’t reflect the same divide on poverty and race. While some may disagree with their prescriptions for these issues, neither party is claiming to advocate for *more* poverty or racism. To the contrary, politicians in both parties say both poverty and racism are important matters to address—they just differ on how they do so. How do we then evaluate whose policies on race and poverty are more faithful to Scripture?

FOR CHRISTIANS SEEKING TO APPLY BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES TO THESE ISSUES, DISCERNMENT, PRAYER, AND WISDOM—AND ROOM FOR DISAGREEMENT—IS NEEDED.

On this question there is no easy answer. On these issues, like many others, tension arises when it comes to application. As Jonathan Leeman has noted, “The movement from core Christian principles to public policies is seldom a straight line but often a ‘complex and jagged’ path through layers of conditioning factors and prudential considerations over which Christians of good conscience might disagree.”²⁹ While some policy prescriptions are obvious—policies or laws that openly and clearly discriminate based on race, national origin, or sex are wrong—there is room to debate policies such as affirmative action, prison reform, and other issues that predominantly affect minority communities. For Christians seeking to apply biblical principles to these issues, discernment, prayer, and wisdom—and room for disagreement—is needed.

Though it is popular to conceive of the Republican party as “anti-poor” and opposed to minority rights, and Democrats as supporting them, this simplified conception is not as neatly supported as many would have us believe. For instance, let’s look at the issue of race relations.

When Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 80 percent of House Republicans³¹ and 82 percent of Senate Republicans³¹ (compared to 61 and 69 percent of Democrats) voted in favor of the historic legislation which ended segregation in public places and schools and outlawed voter registration requirements that unfairly impacted minorities. Republicans and Democrats worked together to end a systematic injustice that had been a blight on the country since its founding.

More recently, Republican lawmakers led the way in passing (almost unanimously) legislation designed to reduce recidivism through vocational training and education courses. House Republicans (262 of them)³² joined 134 Democrats in advancing this bill. According to the NAACP, African-Americans and Hispanics make up 32 percent of the general population but 56 percent of those incarcerated.³³ Thus, efforts to reform the criminal justice system represent steps in addressing problems that disproportionately affect minority communities.³⁴ Further, the African-American unemployment rate plummeted under Republican leadership, hitting an all-time low of 5.9 percent in May 2018 when Republicans controlled the executive and legislative branches of government.³⁵ During this time, black teen unemployment fell to 19.3 percent, another all-time low.³⁶ While the factors contributing to this picture are many, and correlation does not automatically mean causation, the fact remains that recently, under Republican national leadership, more minorities are getting jobs. These are facts that American Christians—accustomed to hearing that Republicans do not care about minorities—should be aware of.

But some may respond by noting that Democrats seem more focused on the plight of minorities and the poor. They give more support to affirmative action programs and other efforts designed to help minority communities, the argument goes. A full examination of the merits of these efforts and whether they truly help minorities and the poor is beyond the scope of this discussion. For the purposes of this publication, it will suffice to note that what is biblically clear is a need to *care for the poor*, not a *specific remedy* to address their plight. Likewise, we must not erect dividing lines based on race; this is clear, but disagreements over whether this is occurring will naturally rise. We must be prepared to be challenged, admit shortcomings, and examine our policy positions in light of the Bible (not the other way around). But at the same time, Christians are *not biblically obligated* to support Democratic proposals for the poor or minorities (indeed, some

might argue such proposals actually harm them), just as they are not obligated to support Republican proposals on these issues. We are biblically mandated to concern ourselves with the poor and break down the dividing walls of racism. At a minimum, we must be able to see that neither party's policy proposals are endorsed by the Bible (unlike with abortion and marriage) and that applying biblical principles to issues related to race often requires situational awareness and discernment.

Specifically on the issue of poverty, there is no doubt many individual Republicans and Democrats care for the poor. It is simply misleading to conflate the parties' different economic philosophies with moral indifference—a conflation which widely contributes to popular conceptions of all Republicans as “against the poor.” The fact that conservatives believe in the efficacy of limited government and free markets in addressing poverty does not indicate apathy toward marginalized communities. On the contrary, conservatives believe that the best conditions for economic flourishing are created when the government's authority is decentralized. The Bible does not endorse a specific economic system—though it does favor some while disfavoring others; the commandment against stealing shows respect for private property as does the Old Testament's regard for inheritances. At any rate, there is room for disagreement on how to address such issues biblically—*unlike* the questions of abortion and marriage/sexuality, discussed previously.

By unfairly characterizing Republican views on racial justice and poverty, cultural elites, many in the media—and, unfortunately, some evangelical leaders—have created a false dichotomy between the two parties. At a minimum, the views of both parties on racial justice and poverty should be debated.



BIBLICAL REFLECTION AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

At this point it should be stated clearly: neither political party is a Christian party in the sense that everything they advocate for lines up perfectly with the Bible. In fact, there are numerous policy issues the Bible does not clearly speak on. On tertiary issues like these, Christians should debate charitably and extend liberty toward one another on points where they disagree. There are a number of issues not mentioned in this publication on which we can draw biblical application, and Christians may consider how those issues impact their engagement and voting.

IN RECENT YEARS, THE TWO MAJOR U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE CLEARLY ADOPTED POSITIONS ON MORAL ISSUES WHICH THE BIBLE DOES SPEAK TO.

However, it is also true in recent years that the two major U.S. political parties have clearly adopted positions on *moral issues* which the Bible *does speak*. On these issues, not only is the Bible's teaching clear, the application for public policy is also clear. For example, the Bible teaches that every human being is a unique image bearer of God and possesses inherent dignity. Thus, biblically speaking, human life is supremely valuable and there is a duty to preserve life. As a matter of public policy, the line from core Christian principle to public policy is straightforward: from the perspective of the Bible, it is right and just to support laws and policies that preserve life. The Bible's moral appraisal and the subsequent policy recommendation are obvious: killing unborn children is morally wrong and ought to be opposed.

Likewise with the Bible's teaching on marriage. The Bible is clear that God ordained marriage as the union of one man and

one woman. Marriage is the institutional means by which God's image bearers fulfill the divine command to fill and subdue the world. Moreover, marriage is representative of the relationship between Christ and the church. Therefore, the Bible holds marriage in extremely high regard. Changing its definition, like the Supreme Court tried to do in 2015, is a direct affront to God's authority. While supporters of same-sex marriage claim to be on the "right side of history," they are on the wrong side of the Bible—not to mention biology, anthropology, and sociology—when it comes to this important issue.

Thus, concerning the moral issues of life and marriage, one of the major parties has embraced positions manifestly at odds with biblical morality. The result has been increased moral confusion in the culture, the undermining of human dignity, and the increased loss of innocent human life in the womb.

While poverty is also an important moral issue in the Bible, the specific action commanded is to concern oneself with care for the poor—not set affirmative action admissions quotas (or to work against them) or implement government-run anti-poverty programs (versus supporting private ones). The biblical position being prescribed (concern for the poor) simply doesn't break down along party lines, like it does with abortion and marriage/sexuality.

ALTHOUGH NEITHER POLITICAL PARTY PERFECTLY REPRESENTS EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS, PARTY PLATFORMS DO ALLOW US TO MAKE CONSIDERED JUDGMENTS FOR WHO TO SUPPORT AT ELECTION TIME.

Thus, although neither political party perfectly represents evangelical Christians, party platforms do allow us to make considered judgments for who to support at election time.

Political scientists have shown that politicians increasingly vote in line with their party's platform—80 percent of the time over the last thirty years.³⁷ Consequently, a party's platform is a good indicator for how politicians from that party will vote. Thus, for Christians, in so far as a platform recommends policies informed by biblical morality, it is easier to make an informed decision about which party to support based on their platform.

Further, while all of these issues are important, Christians should employ a form of moral triage as they consider their political engagement. As Christian ethicist Andrew Walker points out, with abortion, there is a “greater moral urgency to repeal morally unjust and codified laws than there is the priority to ameliorate social evils that exist because of social wickedness and criminal behavior.”³⁸ In other words, the existence of a positive right to terminate the life of unborn children calls for immediate action. Christians concerned about the unborn—the most vulnerable class of people in our country—must leverage their influence, resources, and time to correct this wrong as soon as possible. As part of a holistic effort to create a culture of life, Christians must engage the political process to pass laws that protect life. Mapped out onto the political realities of a two-party system, the outworking of this moral calculus is clear.

There are other reasons one might support politically conservative, small government policies, which are beyond the scope of this paper. But in short, if theologically conservative Christians appear increasingly aligned with one party over another, it is because the other party has forced them there by taking positions on moral issues that oppose the Bible's explicit teaching. Thus, while it is true that Christians should not feel perfectly at “home” in either political party,³⁹ is it fair to suggest that they should feel equally comfortable in both?

The answer would seem to be “no.”

CONCLUSION

Whether “politics” is defined broadly (as the arena in which people organize and govern their shared lives) or narrowly (as the domain that includes the state, political parties, and public policy), Christians should care about politics and engage the political process. Not only is politics unavoidable, it represents a tangible opportunity to honor God and show love to our neighbors.

While Christians on the left and right are sometimes too quick to say they speak for heaven as they advocate for their set of issues, American Christians, with their right to vote, have a unique opportunity and duty to affect politics (narrowly defined). Christians should therefore prayerfully approach the issue of political engagement and seek godly counsel. Ultimately, Christians must filter all issues, candidates, and party platforms through a Christian worldview and submit them to God’s Word. What political or moral issues does the Bible address? Are there policies that are explicitly condemned by the Bible? Are there areas where well-meaning Christians can disagree? These are important questions, and Christians must be instructed and disciplined to think through them with biblical clarity and wisdom.

**AS CHRISTIANS, WE MUST FOLLOW OUR
POLITICAL THEOLOGY TO ITS LOGICAL END BY
VOTING FOR CANDIDATES AND PARTIES THAT
SUPPORT CLEAR BIBLICAL VALUES.**

As those called to honor God in every area of their life, Christians are also called to submit everything to the Lord, including their political engagement. Thus, as those charged with discipling their flocks, it is not enough for pastors and Christian leaders to acknowledge that various policy positions are profoundly evil yet not encourage concrete action. It is not

enough to pray for candidates and speak on a handful of issues when there is the ability to do more. While pastors should never pronounce a “Thus saith the Lord” where there is no warrant, for the sake of robust discipleship they should make sure their congregations are equipped with the resources necessary to honor God in the voting booth.

We must engage, but we must engage biblically. As Christians, this requires—no more, but no less—that we be prepared to grapple with the reality of our two-party system and be willing to follow our political theology to its logical end by voting for candidates and parties that support the clear biblical values outlined here.



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- 1 Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 23–53. Grudem highlights five predominant views about Christians and government that he argues are misguided: government should compel religion, government should exclude religion, all government is evil and demonic, “do evangelism, not politics,” and “do politics, not evangelism.” He proposes a model he describes as “Significant Christian Influence on Government,” pp. 55–76. A classic categorization of how Christians have related to culture and politics is H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1951). Niebuhr’s five options are: “Christian Against Culture,” “Christ of Culture,” “Christ Above Culture,” “Christ and Culture in Paradox,” and “Christ Transforming Culture.”
- 2 David Closson, “Evangelicals Power Republicans to Senate Victories,” *The Stream*, November 14, 2018, accessed May 13, 2019, <https://stream.org/evangelicals-power-republicans-to-senate-victories/>.
- 3 Carl Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1947), 65.
- 4 In fact, the view that Christians are violating the separation of church and state by bringing their beliefs into the public square is a common critique raised by progressive secular elites. However, this criticism is unfair because it misses the intention of the Founders who did not intend to erect a “wall of separation” between all expressions of faith in God and all aspects of public life. The idea that Christian theology is somehow antithetical to law or politics is rooted in the idea that the public square must be thoroughly desacralized and that only secular worldviews are permissible.

But the evacuation of God and biblical values from the public square is an unnecessary concession to secularists who demand a “value neutral” public square. As Richard John Neuhaus argued years ago, the notion that religiously informed beliefs must be kept out of public discourse is false and based on the erroneous belief that secular values are non-religious. Everyone enters the public square with a worldview grounded in fundamental beliefs about what is true; everyone has commitments formed by an overarching metanarrative.

Then-Senator Barack Obama articulated the importance of having a moral basis for politics in 2006. Understanding that the solution to certain problems required moral transformation, Obama knew it was a mistake to argue that religious convictions play no part when it comes to formulating policy. He said: “Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King—indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history—were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their ‘personal morality’ into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.” Source of Obama quote: Michael Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 246.

- 5 Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ’s Rule* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2016), 83. Leeman, quoting Judith Squires, argues that “politics,” properly conceived, is a much broader conception than the institutions of state.

- 6 Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*, 44.
- 7 Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule*, 186. Leeman argues that the institutional question to ask pertaining to Genesis 9 is whom does God give authority to do what? He argues that "God gives human beings the authority to wield the sword... the inevitable and unavoidable implication of these two verses is that groups of people living in society must form or support a government—an orderly set of publicly recognized institutional processes—in order to employ this God-given justice mechanism justly." See Leeman, pp. 186-188.
- 8 Timothy Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2018, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>.
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- 10 Kevin DeYoung, "The Church at Election Time," *The Gospel Coalition*, October 3, 2018, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/church-election-time/>.
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- 28 As Ryan T. Anderson has argued, marriage between one man and one woman is “based on the anthropological truth that men and women are distinct and complementary, based on the biological fact that reproduction requires a man and woman, [and] based on social reality that children deserve both a mother and father.”
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- 39 It should also be noted that the challenges facing American Christians regarding politics is not unique; brothers and sisters in other nations face the same tensions. This is because there is no “Christian” political party; no party aligns perfectly with the Bible. This is true even in countries where dozens of political parties participate in any one election. This means that there is never a perfect choice when it comes to political engagement; on this side of heaven, faithful Christians will always be choosing from less than ideal options. This is why wisdom, prayer, and counsel are indispensable when it comes to Christian political engagement.

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